

Florida State's Hamilton a Top Five All-Time ACC Coach

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You want to win a bar bet?

Ask someone to name the top five winningest coaches in Atlantic Coast Conference history.

Odds are they'll get three right off the bat. Mike Krzyzewski, Dean Smith and Roy Williams are pretty obvious choices.

If they're a college basketball fan, they might get former Maryland coach Gary Williams, who is at No. 4.

But unless you're at a bar in Tallahassee, Fla., you're about to win some money or at least a beer.

Leonard Hamilton has one more ACC games than all but those four names mentioned above.

Yes, Leonard Hamilton. The Florida State coach has won 165 games against ACC competition. More than Lefty Driesell. More than Bobby Cremins. More than Terry Holland or Tony Bennett.

He has turned Florida State into a Top 25 program, leading the Seminoles to the Elite 8 in 2018 and the Sweet 16 last year.

This year, Florida State, even after losing two NBA players in Terrance Mann and Mfiondu Kabengele off last year's squad, is ranked in the Top 10 and challenging for the ACC's regular season title.

Ask around about what makes Hamilton so successful and you get a variety of answers.

"He's a great teacher and he doesn't get a lot of credit for it," North Carolina State coach Kevin Keatts said.

"People always question whether he's an X-and-O guy. That's false. He's really good at everything he does. You're not that successful without being able to do that."

"He's got this very deep faith," former Georgia Tech coach Paul Hewitt said. "He's a very religious man. It brings a calm to him. He keeps going along and working and things are going to work out."

And then there's the guy who might know Hamilton the best.

Stan Jones has been on Hamilton's coaching staff at both Miami and Florida State.

"I tell this all the time to families and prospects we're recruiting," Jones said, "as good a basketball coach that he is, he's a far greater molder and developer of people. He's the genuine article. He deals with people; from his players to his staff, to make sure they are successful."

Hamilton's coaching ability has been pooh-poohed in the past. Like many former assistants; he was an assistant to Joe B. Hall at Kentucky from 1974 to 1986, he was seen as a recruiter for a long time.

"It really bothers me when people just label him as a recruiter," Keatts said. "Recruiting can only go so far. It's about recruiting and developing and coaching these guys."

It's hard to measure in-game coaching, but let's focus on some end-game numbers.

Did you know that Florida State has won nine straight overtime games?

In one-possession games decided by three points or less or in overtime, Florida State has a record of 38-8 (.826 winning percentage) over the last eight years.

Jones said the Seminoles are prepared for late-game situations.

Hamilton goes over scenarios in practice, but there's more to FSU's success in close games than that.

"Coach Hamilton has a demeanor that when more pressure comes on him, the calmer he gets," Jones said. "You never see him in a panic. In a timeout, he says 'I want this' and maybe I'm the one drawing it on the board. He's very calm in those situations. Our kids feed off his demeanor."

While other coaches draw attention to themselves as they rant and rave, or throw their suit jackets, Hamilton's countenance hardly changes.

"People think he's got a death stare, but he's just very focused," Jones said. "He sees everything that's going on. But within that focus, he's also a very receptive guy. He lets the staff speak up and share ideas. He's truly a team guy."

There are reasons that Hamilton's success has been largely unnoticed.

First, if you're the basketball coach at Florida State, you're going to be overshadowed by North Carolina and Duke and even your own school's football program.

Second, while his teams have been relatively successful, Hamilton has yet to lead the Seminoles to the Final Four.

At three different college coaching stops, Hamilton has turned losing programs into winners.

He suffered through two losing seasons in his first head coaching gig at Oklahoma State and then had winning seasons in his last two years. His Miami tenure started with three straight losing seasons, but concluded with consecutive winning seasons.

At Florida State, Hamilton had losing seasons in two of his first three years, but the Seminoles are on a 15-year win streak, including 20-plus wins in each of the last five years.

But Hamilton has never been able to take that last, long step to the Final Four.

Is that fair? Should the lack of one or two wins in the NCAA tournament keep Hamilton from getting the credit he's due?

Keatts doesn't think so.

"He's a really good coach," Keatts said. "He's been to the mountain-top."

Jones says Hamilton doesn't care about credit or accolades.

"He's such an ego-less guy," Jones said. "He just care about his players."

Perhaps this could be the year that Hamilton breaks through to the Final Four.

Florida State has incredible depth with 10 players averaging at least 10 minutes per game.

There's experience with veterans Trent Forrest and M.J. Walker. Devin Vassell, a 6-7 sophomore, is quietly having an All-ACC type of season, leading the Seminoles in points, rebounds and blocks.

And then maybe Hamilton will no longer be the answer to a trivia question.

"You know what? I don't think it bothers him," Hewitt said. "I don't think it bothers him at all. I think he's going to keep toiling away and doing what he does and win his games. Hopefully, it'll happen for him one day and he'll pop up and win a national championship and he'll keep doing his thing."